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# Surface Decoration of Commercial Micro-sized TiO<sub>2</sub> by means of High Energy Ultrasound: a Way to Enhance its Photocatalytic Activity Under Visible Light.

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## Abstract

Although the TiO<sub>2</sub> is one of the most promising materials for its photocatalytic potential related to the pollution abatement, it strongly suffers from the low photocatalytic activity if it is used under visible light and not under UV light. Among the various possible modifications, the surface decoration with metal or metal oxides NPs can be a good strategy to increase the potential of TiO<sub>2</sub> in the visible range. In this paper, a sonochemical method that exploits the use of high-energy ultrasounds is suggested to obtain this surface decoration. The support is a commercial and micrometric TiO<sub>2</sub>, cheaper and easier to handling than the nanometric P25. Samples were tested on the photodegradation of toluene and acetone in a gas phase system, using both the UV and LED lamp.

## 1. Introduction

TiO<sub>2</sub> is the most widely investigated photocatalyst due to its high photo-activity, low cost, low toxicity and good chemical and thermal stability. It was first used for the remediation of environmental pollutants in 1977 and since then there was a dramatic increase in the research in this area because of the potential for water and air purification [1].

Titanium dioxide is typically an n-type semiconductor due to the oxygen deficiency. The band gap is 3.2 eV for Anatase: this is the main TiO<sub>2</sub> polymorph and it is the most active phase in terms of photocatalytic activity.

In photocatalysis, light of energy greater than the band gap of the semiconductor excites an electron from the valence band to the conduction band ( $e_{cb}^-$ ) generating a positive hole in the valence band ( $h_{VB}^+$ ): in the case of titanium dioxide, because of the 3.2 eV band gap, UV light is required.

Positive holes can oxidize  $\text{OH}^-$  or water at the surface to produce  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals, which are extremely powerful oxidants.

A lot of studies describe the negative effects on health related to the exposition to chemical pollutants, found in particular in the indoor environment [2,3,4]. The latter are classified in the VOC's (Volatile Organic Compounds) category, and most of them are toxic or carcinogenic. VOC's are chemical substances of different nature: it is important to underline that more than 300 species were detected in the indoor atmosphere, with a concentration from 2 to 10 times higher than in the outdoor one.

As modern people spend the most part of their time in the indoor environment, it is clear that the air quality of these places is a crucial point of priority interest [2,5].

Among many AOPs (Advanced Oxidation Processes),  $\text{TiO}_2$  photocatalysis is one of the most viable environmental cleanup technology: even if  $\text{TiO}_2$  needs to have an higher activity to be economically competitive, from a practical point of view alternative materials that are as advantageous as  $\text{TiO}_2$  are hard to be found [6].

The recombination of photogenerated charge carriers is one of the main limitations in semiconductor photocatalysis, and the crucial problem related to the practical use of the  $\text{TiO}_2$  is its inability to be active under the visible light. This problem becomes harder when one thinks about  $\text{TiO}_2$  used in the indoor areas where the lighting system is moving towards the total use of LED lamps, which are UV-radiation free.

Therefore, the most important demand is the introduction of the visible light activity that is absent with pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  [7]. In this sense, several modification methods were developed in order to accelerate the photoconversion, enable the absorption of visible light, and alter the reaction mechanism or control products and intermediates [8]. The surface deposition of metal or metal oxide nano-particles (NPs) can be useful because of many factors: metals onto the  $\text{TiO}_2$  surface can enhance the electron transfer or the charge separation and improve the formation of the free hydroxyl radicals; it was shown that also metal oxide particles can have a positive effect because they support the charge separation and prevent their recombination [9,10].

The reason why the surface metal NPs affect the photochemical properties of  $\text{TiO}_2$  is related to three main concepts: firstly, the UV radiation leads to a Fermi level shift, indicating an electron transfer at the interface that promote the photocatalytic reactions; another important aspect to take into account is the presence of free electrons in the metal particles that can be excited by light and finally the possibility that metals act as an electron sink promoting also in this case the charge separation.

Decoration of M- or MO-NPs is commonly implemented by means of ultra-sounds (US) in aqueous or organic solutions where ceramics or polymer substrate powders are dispersed [11]. The idea in this instance is to apply the same method using the micrometric TiO<sub>2</sub> as substrate, depositing on its surface species such as tungsten or rhenium oxide, molybdenum or copper. Because it was widely demonstrated that the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface modification can be useful to improve its photocatalytic activity, sonochemistry is a novel and interesting way to obtain the surface decoration of TiO<sub>2</sub> powder with metal nanoparticles. The sonochemical method described in this paper has been used for instance in the decoration of anode materials for Solid Oxide Fuel Cells (SOFC) [12].

Finally, it is important to underline that the substrate is micrometric TiO<sub>2</sub> and not the nanometric one: the upgrade of the micrometric TiO<sub>2</sub> is crucial because of the important drawbacks of the nanometer powders. The latter could be inhaled and come into direct contact with the cells of the organism; although the negative TiO<sub>2</sub> effects on human health were not fully demonstrated yet, some animals test have reported that TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles are more dangerous than the micro ones and they have an higher influence to cancer, lung cancer in particular [13]. Based on the above mentioned, the use of micro-TiO<sub>2</sub> in order to take advantage from its photocatalytic properties is a challenging study to develop. [14,15,16].

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1 Materials and characterization methods

TiO<sub>2</sub> 1077 by Kronos is a micro-sized photocatalyst classified as pigment [15]. The main properties are summarized in Table 1.

Sample	Composition	Average crystallite size (nm)	SSA (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	XPS	Band (eV)	Gap
1077 by Kronos	100% Anatase	110	12	Ti(IV)	3.15	

**Table 1** Main features of the TiO<sub>2</sub> commercial sample.

For the sonochemical method, the precursor materials are purchased and used without further purification; they are Mo(CO)<sub>6</sub> (≥99,9% Sigma Aldrich), Re<sub>2</sub>(CO)<sub>10</sub> (98% Aldrich), W(CO)<sub>6</sub> (99,99% Sigma Aldrich), and CuCl<sub>2</sub>\*2H<sub>2</sub>O (≥99% Sigma Aldrich).

A Bandelin SONOPLUS HD 3200 utilizing a 200W U/S generator and a sonication extension horn of 13mm diameter generating US are employed.

In a 100 ml glass flask 0.25 g of  $W(CO)_6$  or  $Mo(CO)_6$  or  $Re_2(CO)_{10}$  and 2 g (1 g for the decoration with Re) of Kronos  $TiO_2$  are weighted; 100 ml of diphenylmethane are added and the solution obtained is sonicated at a constant temperature of 80°C for 3 h, with 33,0% amplitude and a 50  $W/cm^2$  intensity. The  $W(CO)_6$  solution changed colour from white to brownish. At the end the solution is centrifuged many times to remove all the solvent; the final powder is washed three times with n-pentane and centrifuged again, and one time with pentane and also in this case is centrifuged after washing. The residual solvent is evaporated and the sample is finally calcined at 480°C for 40 h to completely remove the organic scents.

As for Kronos  $TiO_2$  decorated with copper, a first solution with 3 g of L-ascorbic acid, 5g of CTAB, 72 ml of  $H_2O$  and 2 g of Kronos  $TiO_2$  is prepared. Then, a second solution with 1.5 g of  $CuCl_2 \cdot 2H_2O$ , 6 ml of  $NH_3$  and 15 ml of  $H_2O$  in prepared. They are mixed and the solution obtained is sonicated at a set temperature of 62°C for 2.5 h, with a 55,0% amplitude and a 100  $W/cm^2$ . At the end, the sample is centrifuged in order to remove the solvent and it is washed with water. After washing, the powder is calcinated at 480°C for 40 h.

BET analysis was performed with a Sorptometer Instrument (Costech mod. 1042); the XRD spectra were collected using a PW 3830/3020 X' Pert Diffractometer from PANalytical working Bragg-Brentano, using the  $Cu K_{\alpha 1}$  radiation ( $\lambda = 1.5406 \text{ \AA}$ ); TEM images were collected using the JEOL 3010-UHR Instrument (acceleration potential 300kV;  $LaB_6$  filament); the XPS characterizations were performed with a M-probe apparatus (Surface Science Instruments).

Absorption/transmission IR spectra were obtained on a Perkin-Elmer FT-IR System 2000 spectrophotometer equipped with a Hg-Cd-Te cryo-detector, working in the range of wavenumbers 7200-580  $cm^{-1}$  at a resolution of 2  $cm^{-1}$  (number of scans ~20). For IR analysis powder catalyst was compressed in self-supporting disc (of about 10  $mg\ cm^{-2}$ ) and placed in a homemade quartz cell, equipped with KBr windows, connected to a conventional high-vacuum line (UHV). Spectra were recorded at room temperature (RT) on the samples after prolonged outgassing at RT.

## 2.2 Photocatalytic tests

The photodegradation kinetics was performed using both a UV lamp (Jelosil – Model HG-500, 500 W,  $\lambda = 315-400\text{ nm}$ ) and a LED lamp (MW mean well, 350mA rated current, 9-48V DC voltage range, 16.8W rated power) with an emission between 400 and 700nm. The pollutants concentration was monitored using a gas chromatography (Agilent 3000 A microGC).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Sample characterization

Sample	BET surface area (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )
1077 by Kronos (reference sample)	12
A (Kronos + W)	13
B (Kronos + Re)	13
C (Kronos + Mo)	12
D (Kronos + Cu)	4

Table 2 BET surface areas.

As it is shown in Table 2, surface decoration has almost no effect on the surface area of the samples, but for the Cu-decorating sample for which a marked reduction of surface area is observed.

As evidenced in the XRD patterns reported in Figure 1, surface decoration does not affect the structural properties of Kronos 1077. All the XRD patterns exhibit the presence of the peaks characteristic of the anatase phase [ICDD anatase file no. 21-1272]. In particular, for both W- and Re-containing samples XRD analysis puts in evidence that only the peaks related to anatase are present. Differently, in addition to these diffraction peaks, the XRD patterns of Cu- and Mo-containing samples show the presence of peaks related to CuO [spatial group C2/c, monoclinic phase, ICDD tenorite file no. 01-072-0629], Cu<sub>2</sub>O [spatial group Pn3m, cubic phase, ICDD cuprite file no. 01-075-1531] and MoO<sub>3</sub> [spatial group Pbnm, orthorhombic phase, ICDD molybdate file no. 01-075-0912] phases, respectively. The presence of copper oxide phases is reasonably related to the loss of surface area observed for Cu-containing sample.

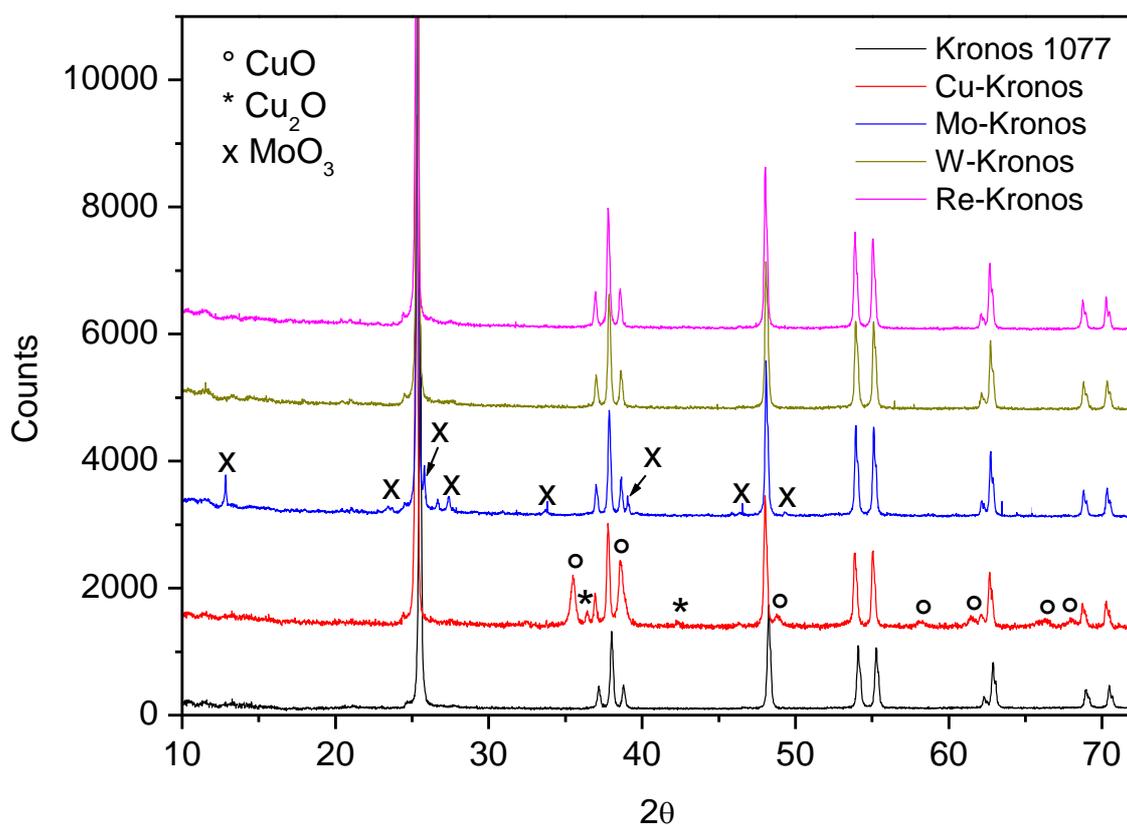


Figure 1: XRD patterns of bare and decorated Kronos 1077.

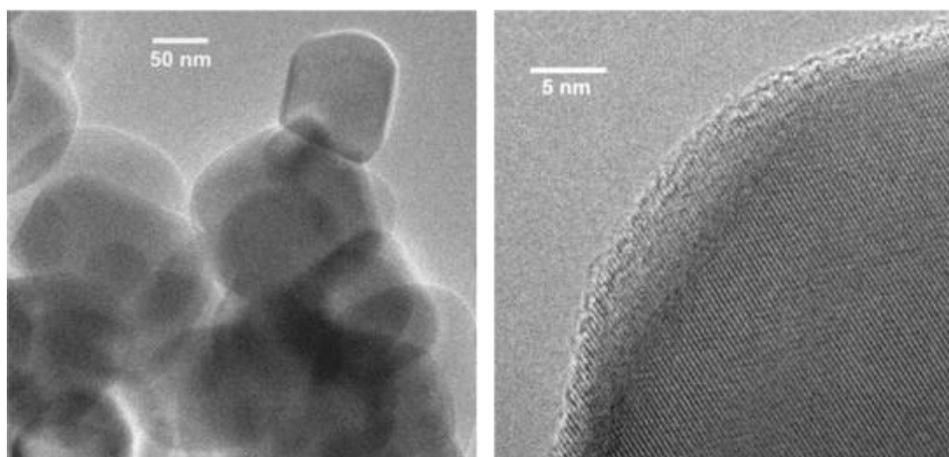
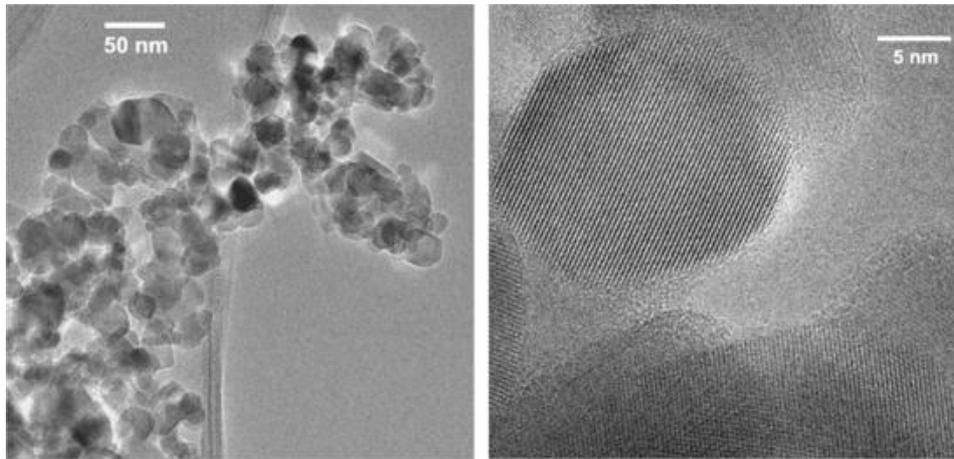


Figure 2: TEM images of Kronos 1077.

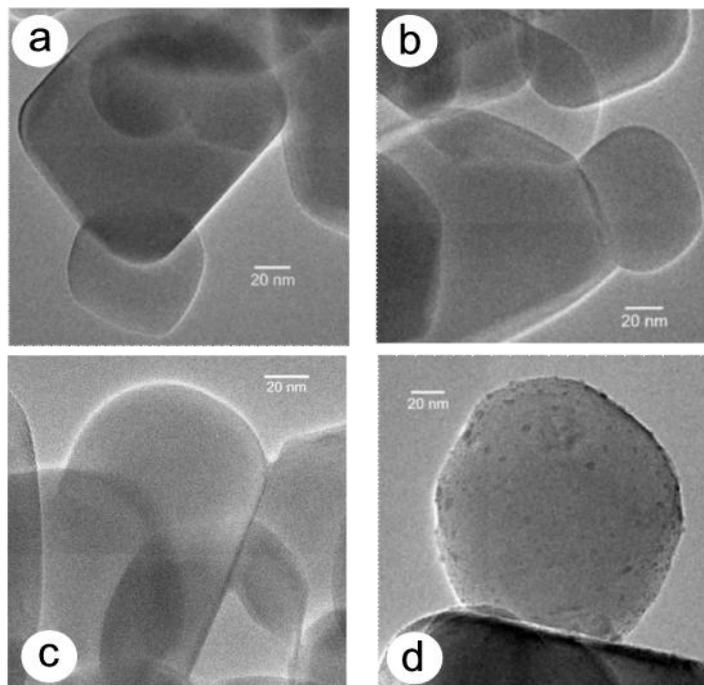
TEM analysis shows that the bare Kronos 1077 is characterized by an average crystallites dimensions lying in the 100-150 nm range (see figure 2 TEM): the titania particles exhibit roundish contours and very clear fringes patterns, the detailed inspections of which always indicates the presence of anatase, in particular of the (101) crystal planes [ICDD anatase file no. 21-1272]. If we compare this material with the reference nanometric  $\text{TiO}_2$  system used in photocatalysis, i.e. P25 by

Aeroxide Evonik, its very different morphology is evident (see figure 3) and is already discussed by Bianchi et al. [18].



**Figure 3: TEM images of P25 by Evonik.**

All the decorated materials have been investigated by means of HRTEM in order to shed some light onto their morphological habit.

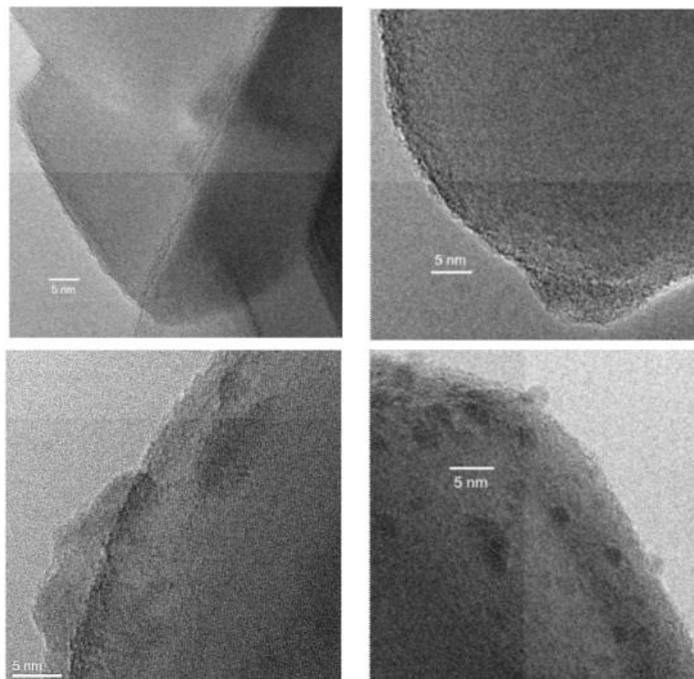


**Figure 4: Low magnification TEM images of all decorated systems. a) Mo decorated Kronos; b) Re decorated Kronos; c) W decorated Kronos; d) Cu decorated Kronos.**

At low magnification (Figure 4), all decorated samples exhibit the main morphological features typical of the parent Kronos system, i.e. well ordered TiO<sub>2</sub> crystallites with almost unchanged average dimensions, in agreement with XRD results. This is totally true for Mo, W and Re

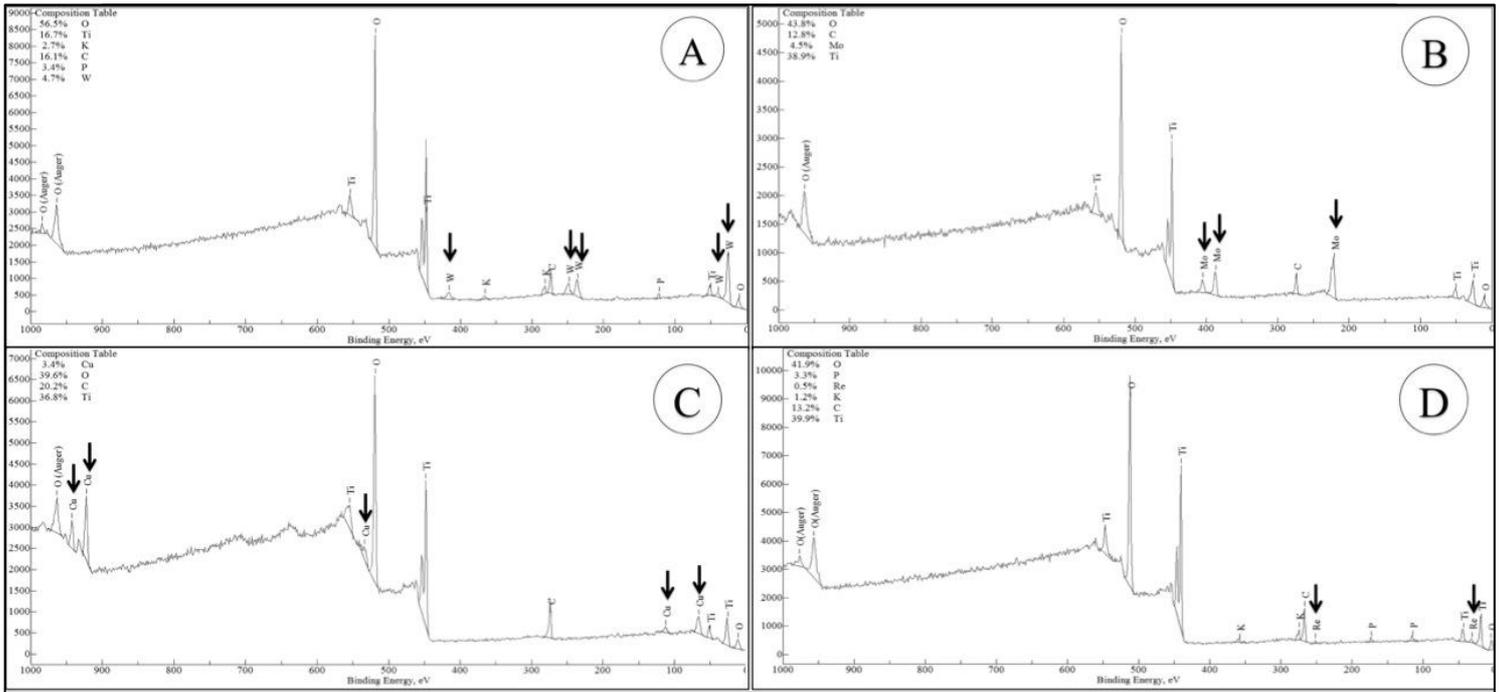
decorated materials, whereas a few peculiarities can be put into evidence for the Cu decorated TiO<sub>2</sub>. In fact, for the latter system a huge amount of small (nano) particles are present on top of the parent Kronos surface (see section d in figure 4). If in the latter cases the different external habit of the crystallites can be due to the presence of an extra species, for the other samples there is no indication of the presence of Mo, W or Re species. We then performed for all samples EDX analyses: in all cases the presence of the extra species has been confirmed (data not reported of the sake of brevity).

Moreover, we carried out also a detailed inspection in high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (Figure 5), in order to investigate the ultimate nature of the crystallites. For Re decoration the features typical of the parent Kronos system remain almost unchanged, whereas in the case of Mo, W and Cu addition remarkable changes are evident.



**Figure 5 TEM: High magnification TEM images of W (top images) and Cu (bottom images) decorated systems.**

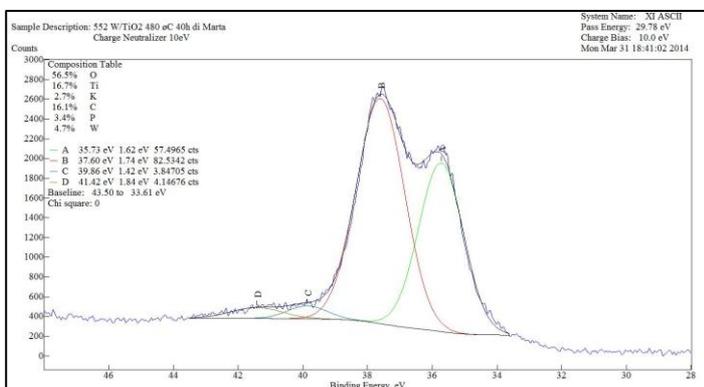
When W is present as decorating agent (see the top images reported in figure 5), a general loss of definition of the crystallinity of the TiO<sub>2</sub> particles is observed: the fringes patterns always well defined for the Kronos system are now hardly evident. The same can be observed for Mo-containing sample (not reported). This might be due to the presence of either W or Mo in the form of oxide (or sub-oxide) covering the support particles as a thin “coating”, and not in the form of metal, as the typical features of metallic W or Mo have been never evidenced. This is in agreement with XRD results obtained for Mo-Kronos that put well in evidence the presence of the MoO<sub>3</sub> phase. Otherwise, no W-phases were visible by XRD, reasonably either due to the amount under the detection limit of the technique or because in the form of an amorphous coating.



**Figure 6 XPS: Survey analysis. A) W decorated Kronos; B) Mo decorated Kronos; C) Cu decorated Kronos; D) Re decorated Kronos.**

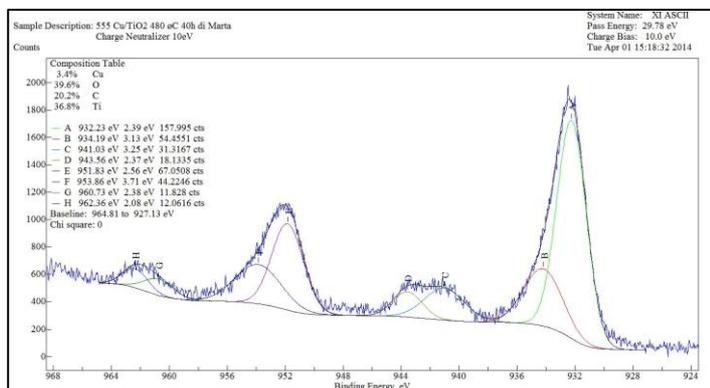
For all decorations carried out using Cu, its presence is well evident. In fact, a lot of particles with the contrast typical of a metal are observed (see the bottom images in figure 5). The average dimensions of these particles lies in the “nano” range, as they measure 1 nm or less in diameter: nevertheless, in this case the fringes patterns described for the TiO<sub>2</sub> Kronos system are still observable.

XPS spectra are reported in figure 6. Each spectrum confirms the presence of the metal specie on the Kronos surface.



**Figure 6 XPS: W high-resolution spectrum.**

In this spectrum (FIG 7) it is possible to see the distribution of the tungsten peaks and in particular the most important is the peak “A” that refers to the WO<sub>3</sub> species, in agreement with the results obtained by TEM analysis.



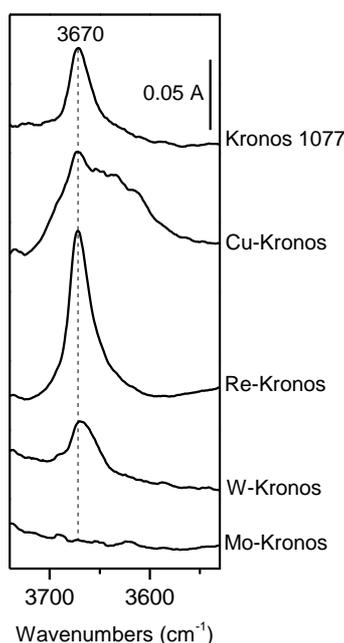
**Figure 7 xps: Cu high-resolution spectrum.**

The figure 8 refers to copper decorated Kronos: the main peaks denote to the species Cu, CuO and Cu<sub>2</sub>O and the presence of Cu in metal form is demonstrated, in agreement with the results obtained with XRD and TEM analysis.

As already discussed by Bianchi et al. [18], it was possible to evaluate the OH/O ratio for each decorated sample by means of the oxygen high-resolution spectra; the values measured for each sample are 0.51 for W decorated Kronos, 0.26 for Re decorated Kronos, 0.09 for Mo decorated Kronos and 0.24 for Cu decorated Kronos respectively.

The analysis of the surface hydroxyl groups was performed by collecting FT-IR spectra after prolonged outgassing at room temperature in order to remove physisorbed molecular water.

The spectra of samples prepared with Cu, Re and W show the typical peak related to the stretching mode of free hydroxyl groups of Kronos 1077 at 3670 cm<sup>-1</sup> [19], while the spectrum of the sample prepared with Mo does not show it. This last finding can be related to the complete coverage of Kronos surface by a widely spread MoO<sub>3</sub> phase, whose presence has been put into evidence by XRD, TEM and XPS analysis. The copper-containing sample is characterized by other families of free hydroxyl groups reasonably related to CuO and Cu<sub>2</sub>O phases, whose presence was already put into evidence by XRD and XPS analysis.



**Figure 8 FT-IR spectra.**

### 3.2 Photocatalytic tests

In the figure 8 the system scheme is reported.

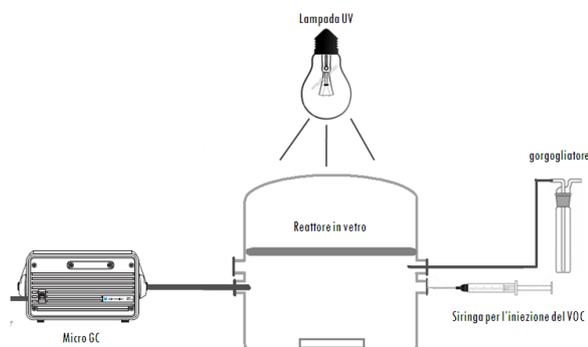


Figure 9 Gas-phase system scheme.

The degradation reaction of toluene follows a multi-step path as is reported in the figure 9, with the formation of different byproducts before getting to the complete oxidation to  $\text{CO}_2$  and water [22,18,23].

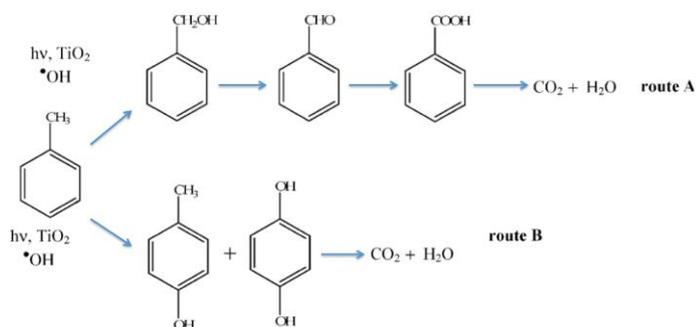


Figure 10 Toluene oxidation reaction pathway [22].

The samples were tested on the photodegradation of toluene firstly using the UV lamp.

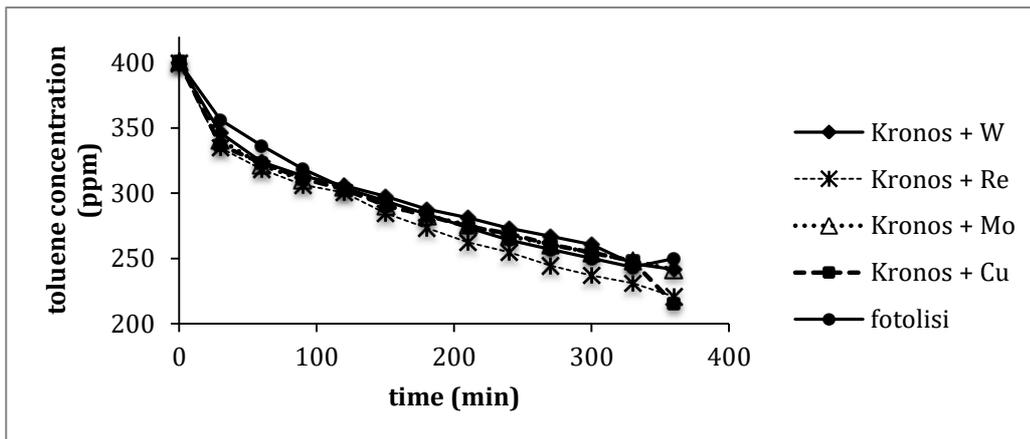


Figure 11 Toluene photodegradation in gas-phase under UV radiations; [Toluene concentration] vs. Time

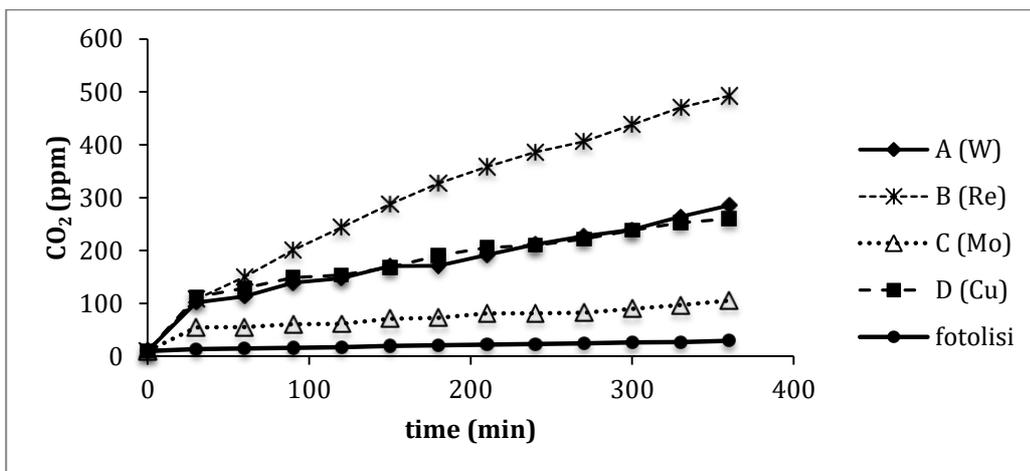


Figure 12 CO<sub>2</sub> formation

In case of the toluene degradation, apparently the species put on the surface by the decoration do not increase the photocatalytic activity of the material; but they affect the byproducts' conversion into CO<sub>2</sub>, so the surface decoration profitably acts on the byproducts, showing its concrete help in the degradation of the pollutant. In particular, the Re-containing sample shows the highest CO<sub>2</sub> formation.

The tests on the acetone photodegradation were performed both with the UV lamp and the LED lamp.

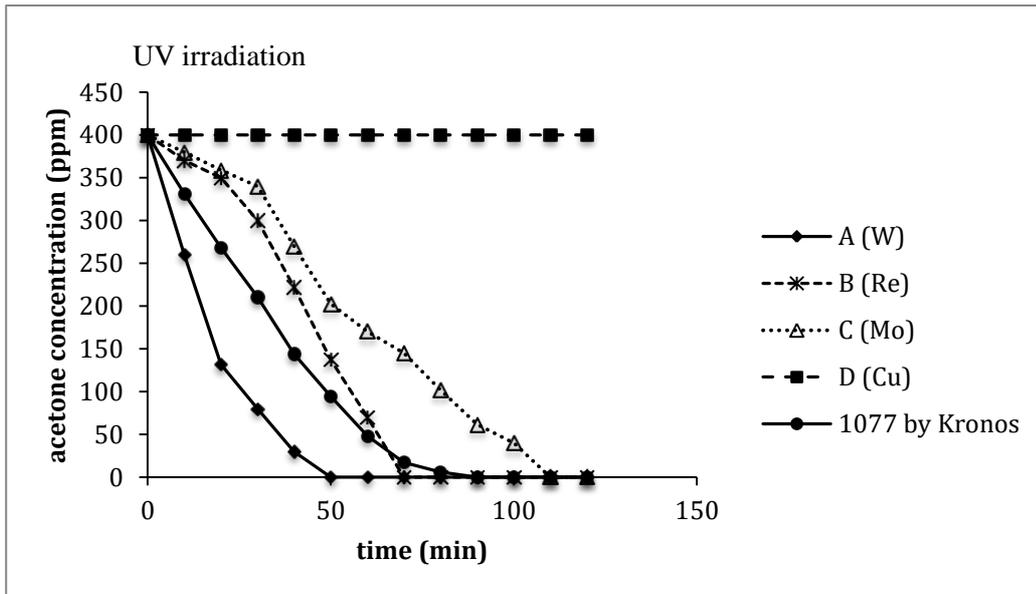


Figure 13 Acetone photodegradation in gas-phase under UV irradiation.

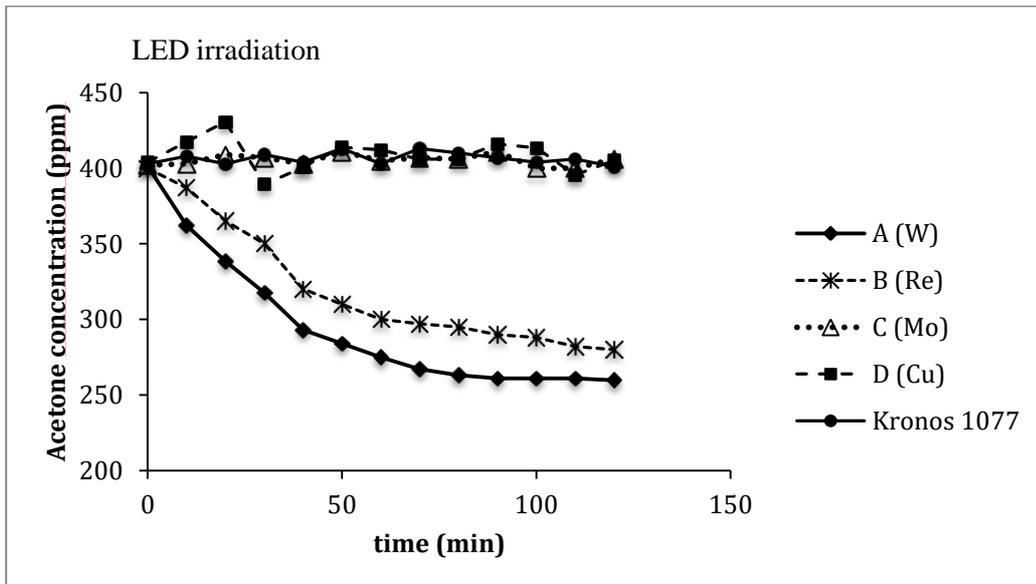


Figure 14 Acetone photodegradation in gas-phase under visible light (performed by a LED lamp).

In case of acetone degradation, the effects of the surface decoration can already be seen directly on the degradation kinetic of the molecule, where the performances have definitely improved compared to Kronos 1077 results, in particular for W-containing sample. The presence of the tungsten oxide ( $WO_3$ ) is confirmed in particular by the XPS analysis; moreover, in the TEM images it is possible to see that a thin film covers the Kronos surface, and it is tungsten oxide. Also the IR spectrum complies with this last information because the lower OH peak compared to Kronos is maybe due to the coating effect of tungsten oxide. All these concepts support the good results in the photodegradation tests because  $WO_3$  is a semiconductor with known photocatalytic activity [24,25]

and in this case it plays an important role in the degradation of the pollutant, justifying its effects. A complete loss of activity is observed in the case of the decoration of TiO<sub>2</sub> with Cu.

At least, using the LED lamp, without any UV radiation, it is clear that W and Re addition onto the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface plays a crucial role in the activation of the catalyst under the visible light. In fact the TiO<sub>2</sub> as it is, is not able to work with visible light only, because of the band gap of the TiO<sub>2</sub> which needs higher energy as delivered by UV light.

The most apparent characteristic that could be related to the good activity of Re-decorating sample is the presence of a significant amount of free hydroxyl radicals, confirmed by the peak in the IR spectrum. Unfortunately, the TEM images and the XPS spectrum are not so useful to evaluate the presence of rhenium in the oxide form, but the results are clearly a positive signal of a changing in the material properties necessarily due to the presence of the rhenium.

If we take into consideration the chemical activity of the metal oxides themselves, the main concepts useful to explain the decorated TiO<sub>2</sub> behavior are the following: firstly, the presence of the metal oxides increases the “antenna effect”; the species on the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface are able to capture the electrons of the visible light, making them usable in the redox reactions that occur upon the surface. Secondly, it was shown that species like metal or metal oxides are able to act as an electron trap, reducing the electron-hole recombination rate [9,26].

#### **4. Conclusions**

Through the innovations introduced by sonochemistry, it was possible to obtain this new type of surface decoration of a pigmentary micro-TiO<sub>2</sub>, proving that this modification method can improve the photocatalytic activity of the material, in particular under the visible light, where pure TiO<sub>2</sub> is not an effective photocatalyst.

The most interesting species loaded on the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface are the tungsten oxide and the rhenium oxide because they have the best performances in terms of degradation of VOC's. Although the results obtained using the samples prepared with copper NPs are absolutely not good, it is highly likely that this is due to the amount of copper, so that samples decorated with different Cu content as the ones used in the present work should be prepared and tested in order to find the most useful loading.

It is possible to improve the photocatalytic activity of microsized TiO<sub>2</sub> (anatase) using decoration with different metal(oxide) nanoparticles, in particular under visible light, getting a very interesting product useful for the VOC's abatement and the consequent improvement of the air quality.

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